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Amanda Dambuza, centre, flanked by speakers at The Gentlemen's Brunch. Image: Tanyaradzwa Ntuli

The Gentlemen's Brunch addresses father absence, male suicide rates, and emotional vulnerability in a landmark gathering.

By Simon Manda

JOHANNESBURG, 21 June 2025 – In an unprecedented gathering that challenged societal norms around masculinity, The Gentlemen's [Brunch](#) brought together leading voices to address the pressing mental health crisis facing men across South Africa. The intimate yet powerful Gentlemen's Brunch, held on June 21, 2025, saw notable individuals from academia, entertainment, business, and spirituality engage in courageous

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conversations about topics that society often sidesteps.



Clement Manyathela navigated the program line-up as the MC. Image: Tanyaradzwa Ntuli

Curated by Vastly Sage founder Amanda Dambuza in partnership with [Signature Restaurant](#) and [YL \(Your Luxury Africa\)](#) and sponsored by [Clarins Men](#), the day-long gentleman's brunch from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. created what the organisers described as “a sacred space for reflection, great food, connection, and courageous conversations.”

Confronting South Africa's Fatherhood Crisis

The Gentlemen's Brunch opened with sobering statistics from Professor Kopano Ratele, a

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renowned masculinities scholar from the University of Stellenbosch, who revealed that only 35.6% of children in South Africa live with their biological fathers – the lowest rate ever recorded. This stark reality formed the backdrop for discussions about absent fathers, generational trauma, and the ripple effects on families and communities.

“Physical presence differs from emotional presence – being psychologically present is crucial for child development,” Professor Ratele explained, drawing from his State of South Africa’s Fathers research conducted every three years since 2018. His revelation about his father’s death in December 2022 and his decision not to attend the funeral illustrated the complex emotions many men carry around paternal relationships.



Professor Ratele at The Gentlemen's Brunch. Image: Tanyaradzwa Ntuli

The professor's research highlighted disturbing demographic patterns: while Indian men have the highest physical presence among fathers in South Africa, followed by white and coloured men at approximately 50%, African men rank at the bottom. This data underscores the particular challenges facing Black families in post-apartheid South Africa.

Professor Ratele emphasised that “social fathers”—including uncles, grandfathers, and community figures—have increasingly taken on parental roles when biological fathers are absent, underscoring the significance of male mentorship networks in child development.

The Silent Epidemic of Male Suicide

Dr. Mzamo Masito, founder of the non-profit African Men Care, delivered perhaps the day's most harrowing statistics while sharing his deeply personal story of loss. “Research shows that men

complete suicide 4–5 times more often than women, while women are more likely to think about suicide,” he revealed, citing two keywords that consistently appear in male suicide notes: “worthless” and “useless”.

Dr Masito’s brother, who had served 15 years in prison for killing a young boy, ultimately took his life along with his eight-year-old son after struggling with depression and repeated business failures. This tragic story illuminated how societal expectations and a lack of emotional support systems can prove fatal for vulnerable men.

“We need to create safe spaces for men to express vulnerability and say ‘**me too**’ regarding trauma,” Dr. Masito emphasised, challenging the audience to recognise that fathers are often “products of their woundings” and require grace rather than judgement.

His presentation highlighted the devastating impact of negative language on male self-perception, particularly when mothers call fathers “useless” in front of children, inadvertently damaging

sons' self-worth and perpetuating cycles of emotional harm.

Spirituality and Modern Fatherhood

Actor and creative Muzi Mthabela brought a deeply personal perspective on spirituality and identity formation, sharing how his grandfather and father, despite their flaws, shaped his

understanding of manhood. “I regard my grandfather as the quintessential gentleman.” He received an education. He was a loving man. He used to cook for my grandmother,” Mthabela reflected, painting a picture of positive masculinity that included emotional expressiveness and domestic participation.

However, Mthabela also addressed the complexity of learning from flawed role models, noting how both his grandfather and father struggled with fidelity despite their many positive qualities. “I had to ask myself, if I want to be among the men who can change the perception of masculinity, there are certain qualities I should adopt from these men and certain behaviours I need to avoid,” he explained.

His discussion of spirituality emphasised the importance of having “a relationship with a higher calling”, which is essential for modern fathers navigating rapidly changing social expectations and technological advancements.

Redefining Masculinity Through Identity and Style

Theo Ngobeni, founder of luxury menswear brand Mr Slimfit and one of GQ South Africa's 2018 Best Dressed Men, approached masculinity through the lens of personal identity and self-care. His philosophy that "style is a way to say who you are without hearing

you speak a word” resonated deeply with attendees seeking to understand authentic self-expression.

“Being a male is a birthright. You get it when you are born. But being a man is a decision that you make for yourself,” Ngobeni explained, emphasising the importance of conscious choice in defining modern masculinity. His message focused on healing “father wounds”—the emotional damage caused by absent or emotionally unavailable fathers that affects men’s ability to form healthy relationships and identities.

Ngobeni’s work with successful male clients revealed a consistent pattern: “Most of us are trying to compensate for something that we lack, something we did not have growing up.” His call for men to engage in therapy and emotional healing work challenged traditional notions of strength and self-reliance.

“It’s okay for us to say we don’t know. Just because you are a CEO of a blue-chip company does not mean you know everything,” Ngobeni

declared, advocating for vulnerability and continuous learning as marks of authentic leadership.

Grief, Loss, and Emotional Resilience

Reverend Kabelo Motlhakane and business executive Simphiwe Phakathi facilitated the session on

grief and loss, which provided some of the day's most moving testimonies. Phakathi shared how losing his mother at 25 forced him to become an overnight parent to his younger siblings, fundamentally altering his life trajectory.

Simphele Phakathi discussed the effects of loss and grief on manhood. Image: Tanyaradzwa Ntuli

“I became a parent of two overnight, to my siblings, and my world changed overnight,” Phakathi recounted, describing how his stepfather abandoned the children, saying he “didn’t want them” but wanted to sell the family home. This experience compelled

Phakathi to face the harsh truth that he had to adopt a mindset of being strong and supportive of others, as he felt he lacked the time to grieve.

Reverend Motlhakane, drawing from his own experience of parental abandonment, emphasised how “grief and loss can either harden you or open you up.” His journey from anger and mistrust to forgiveness illustrated the benefits of addressing emotional wounds directly rather than suppressing them.

“I realised that for me to be a priest, I needed to forgive the two people that I hated the most in the world,” Motlhakane shared, describing his eventual reconciliation with his mother and the grace required to understand her trauma and abandonment.

Economic Pressures and Male Identity

The conversations repeatedly returned to economic anxiety as a driving force in male mental health challenges. Professor Ratele cited economic anxiety as the top issue for American men, according to recent research, whereas speakers throughout the day discussed how

financial pressures compound emotional struggles.

**Bronwen Olivier from Clarins.
Clarins Men was the main sponsor
of The Gentlemen's Brunch. Image:
Tanyaradzwa Ntuli**

The expectation for men to be providers creates a double bind, which many attendees recognised, while society simultaneously critiques traditional masculine roles. Bronwen Olivier from Clarins highlighted this contradiction in her opening remarks, noting how women's empowerment conferences revealed that despite calls for independence, survey respondents still expected men to be financial providers and caregivers in old age.

Healthcare and Self-Care Revolution

Victor Snyder from Skin Renewal presented compelling evidence of shifting attitudes towards male self-care, revealing that the proportion of male patients in their client base has increased from 5% to 30% over the past two decades. “The single biggest growing demographic of all of our patients is Black males,” Snyder noted, reflecting broader shifts in masculine identity and self-expression.

**Victor Snyder from Skin Renewal discusses the importance of skincare with Clement Manyathela.
Image: Tanyaradzwa Ntuli**

This growth challenges traditional notions of masculinity that discouraged attention to physical appearance and health, suggesting a generation of men more comfortable with comprehensive self-care approaches.

Beyond Statistics: Human Stories of Resilience

The Gentlemen's Brunch's power lay not just in its research-backed insights but in the raw, personal testimonies shared by speakers. Mercedes-Benz South Africa's general manager, Mayur Miles Bhana, shared both humour and insight while discussing the challenges of balancing demanding careers with modern fatherhood.

Mayur (Miles) Bhana at The Gentlemen's Brunch. Image: Tanyaradzwa Ntuli

“You are who you’ve been looking for,” Bhana declared, sharing poetry about self-acceptance and the importance of treating oneself with compassion. His frank discussion of family dynamics and the pressures facing modern

fathers resonated with many attendees juggling similar responsibilities.

Societal Implications and Systemic Change

The conversations highlighted critical gaps in South Africa's social support systems. With 19-20% of children growing up without any biological parent present, according to speakers, the country faces a child abandonment crisis with far-reaching implications for mental health, crime, and economic development.

The Gentlemen's Brunch's emphasis on therapy, emotional literacy, and breaking generational cycles of

trauma offers a roadmap for addressing these challenges. Speakers consistently advocated for creating environments where vulnerability is considered strength rather than weakness and where men can access mental health support without stigma.

Television and radio broadcaster Clement Manyathela, serving as master of ceremonies, framed the day's discussions within broader social transformation needs, noting how "we don't realise how much grief, disappointment, and unmet expectations we carry as men, and it's very seldom that we're encouraged to talk about it."

Economic and Social Impact

The discussions revealed how untreated male mental health issues affect workplace productivity, family stability, and community safety. With South Africa's high unemployment rates and social challenges, investing in male mental health emerges as

both a humanitarian imperative and an economic necessity.

The Gentlemen's Brunch attracted professionals from diverse sectors, including corporate executives and creatives, underscoring the universal nature of these challenges, regardless of social or economic background. The frank discussions about therapy, emotional support, and mental health resources underline the need for systemic changes in how institutions support male employees and community members.

Cultural Transformation and Future Implications

The Gentlemen's Brunch represents a growing movement that challenges traditional masculine stereotypes while honouring positive aspects of male identity. By creating spaces for authentic dialogue about fatherhood, mental health, and emotional wellness, such initiatives offer hope for breaking cycles of trauma and building healthier communities.

As South Africa grapples with high

rates of gender-based violence, crime, and social inequality, conversations about healthy masculinity become increasingly crucial. The Gentlemen's Brunch's success suggests an appetite for continued dialogue and systemic change in how society supports male mental health and emotional development.

For a country seeking healing and progress, these conversations about vulnerable, accountable, and emotionally intelligent manhood offer a pathway towards a more equitable future where men can contribute positively to family life, economic development, and social cohesion.

For more information about The Gentlemen's Brunch and future events, contact Vastly Sage at www.vastlysage.com

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